Male-Female Polarity Symbolism in Kafir Art and Religion
New Aspects in the Study of the Kafirs of the Hindu-Kush

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Ac. No. 25

1900

The coincidence was purely accidental, but nevertheless saddening to all students of human cultures. While Sir George Scott Robertson's famous book, *The Káfirs of the Hindu-Kush,* published in 1896 (1), was drawing much public attention to a unique and obviously very old tribal culture, which had survived for a millennium amidst a hostile Islamic environment, all but a small eastern offshoot of this culture (2) was already officially dead. In the winter of 1895/6 an Afghan army had moved into the relatively inaccessible valley south of the Hindu Kush ridge and had conquered a hitherto fiercely independent non-Islamic people for the glory of Islam and the then Emir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan (3). With its gods dethroned, its temples destroyed, its countless effigies burnt (4), its hierarchy of social ranks abolished, its merit-feasting made meaningless, its slaves freed, and with the egalitarian dignity of Islam replacing the old order,

(*) The following remarks should be considered as field notes written without the benefit of libraries and other comparative resource material. My field work, suggested by Prof. Karl Jettmar (South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg) and sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, is being carried out in cooperation with the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Kabul University. My thanks are due to all the Afghan authorities concerned. I also would like to thank Prof. Richard N. Frye and Miss Margaret Mills for critically reading the manuscript and making valuable suggestions.

(1) G.S. ROBERTSON, *The Káfirs of the Hindu-Kush,* London, 1896. Robertson's account is based on his stay in Kafiristan (mainly in the village of Kamdesh) from September 1890 until October 1891. There are two reprints available. The more recent one was published in 1974 by the Oxford University Press, Karachi (with an

the small group of Kafirs known as the Kalash, living in the small valleys of Berir, Bumburet, and Rumbur in Chitral, Pakistan, were left in peace. The best published description of this small group of people, which continues to adhere to its old beliefs and tradition, is still R.C.F. SCHOMBERG's *Kafirs and Glaciers,* London, 1938. For further bibliographical data see JETTMAR's *Die Religionen..., cit.* below.

(3) The invasion of Kafiristan was more or less prompted by the Afghan-British agreement of 1893 which delimited the border between India and Afghanistan, known as the Durand Line. On the basis of this agreement Kafiristan was incorporated into the dominion of the Emir Abdur Rahman Khan whose aim was to build up a strong and centralized state of Afghanistan.

(4) Apparently a total of thirty-two wooden effigies were brought to Kabul and presented to the Emir. Fourteen statues have since disap-

Kafiristan ceased to be the "Land of the Heathens" and became Nuristan, the "Land of Light". A most interesting and historically most important culture henceforth rapidly disintegrated, before any thorough study could be undertaken. Robertson was virtually the first and last westerner privileged to visit the Kafirs, let alone spend a year with them as he did ([5]).

Nuristan remained virtually closed to anthropological research until after the Second World War. Only on the occasion of the interdisciplinary German Hindu Kush Expedition was a quick cultural survey done in 1935 ([6]). G. Morgenstierne, the Norwegian linguist famous for his studies of Indo-Iranian frontier languages, had to work with Nuristani informants in Kabul ([7]).

After the Second World War the area became accessible for cultural and social research. In 1947 the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia was the first to take advantage of the new situation ([8]). In 1949 Morgenstierne followed, and since then much valuable documentation on remains of the fast-vanishing Kafir past has been brought together ([9]). Nevertheless in 1957 Heine-Geldern felt motivated to publish a mournful epilogue: « The country was a real anthropologist's paradise, but no anthropologist visited it until it was too late ». His concern is that of a Viennese historical ethnologist: « One can hardly overestimate the amount of light which a thorough knowledge of Kafir culture might have thrown on the social and religious life of the ancient Aryans of India and Iran » ([10]). There are also other aspects to be considered, as will be shown.

In 1970 the Danes tried to coordinate the different studies and to provide further stimulus by organizing the "Hindu-Kush Cultural Conference" at Moesgård ([11]). However, as this conference showed clearly, there was still a remarkable lack of coherent research covering more than isolated cultural areas or phenomena. Published material was also scarce, and much of the published data were random finds. The lacuna in publications

([5]) Before Robertson only the members of the Gilgit Expedition led by Col. William Lockhart had briefly visited the northeastern corner of Kafiristan, the upper Bashgal valley, in September/October 1885. See W. Lockhart, R.G. Woodthorpe, *Confidential Report of the Gilgit Mission 1885-6*, London, 1889.

Language », *Norsk tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap*, 17, 1954, pp. 146-323; P. Snoy, *Die Kafiren. Formen der Wirtschaft und geistigen Kultur*, Ph. D. thesis, Frankfurt am Main, 1962; S. Jones, *An Annotated Bibliography of Nuristan (Kafiristan) and the Kalash of Chitral*, 2 parts, Copen-

was recently reduced by Jettmar's impressive compilation of all known data on "Religionen des Hindukush" ([12]).

I myself in the autumn of 1971 began broad-spectrum cultural-historical studies focusing on the arts of Kafiristan and their socio-cultural background. I continued my research in most of the summer and autumn of 1972 and again in autumn of 1974. During these field-trips, which lasted a total of about eight months, I visited the major part of Nuristan except for the valleys of the northwest, which actually have hardly ever been visited by scholars ([13]).

Field research in Nuristan is greatly hampered by poor accessibility and the vastness of the area, which covers about 7,000 sq. km. and counts about 80,000 inhabitants. The many individual valleys are divided from each other by increasingly higher mountains the closer one gets to the main ridges of the Hindu Kush, making surveys particularly energy- and time-consuming. Furthermore, any research on topics related to the Kafir past is impeded by the fact that the Kafir culture is not only dead but also has been replaced by a religion considered to be incomparably superior. Good informants are dying out quickly, and the few left are generally very reluctant to speak about their heathen past. In addition, there is no ritual left to back up the scattered data, unearthed like half-buried dry leaves from a dead tree of unknown species. Likewise the Kafir art objects, in particular the spectacular wood carvings, float contextless out of the Nuristani's "unvanquished past". Recently the uncertain general attitude towards Kafir art and ceremonial objects has shifted towards more businesslike feelings caused by the influx of countless dealers buying for the thriving antique market of Kabul.

Finally, there is the cultural diversity which cannot but bewilder the researcher. Isolated by high mountains, the settlements of a particular valley have developed distinct bonds between them, and accordingly cultural traits can differ considerably even between neighbouring valleys. The degree of difference can convey an impression of cultures altogether separate. This is also very much the case in language, since among the four language groups of Nuristan, the Kati, Waigali, Ashkun, and Parun, the last seems totally unrelated to the other three groups. Only Waigali and Ashkun are, to some degree, mutually comprehensible. In short, the linguistic and cultural diversity is such that it seems difficult to speak of a Kafir culture in more than very general terms.

In spite of all these negative factors the Kafir culture can still be reconstructed to some degree, making it possible to place the art and ritual objects in a related cultural context, however different from one valley to the other. Like the linguistic divisions, this Kafir culture should be divided into four main areas, namely 1) the Bashgal valley in the

valleys in the northwest, the inhabitants of which all speak different versions of the western Kati idiom, and 4) the small Parun valley in the north. All these areas except the valleys in the northwest have been visited by different scholars and accordingly have been studied to some extent from different points of view. The northwestern area, briefly visited by members of the German Hindu Kush Expedition in 1935 and by the Afghan scholar A. R. Palwal in 1971, reputedly has lost most of its old culture, since its population was for decades exiled after the heavy local fighting in 1896. The small Parun valley, on the other hand, has provided us with a unique wealth of data, more impressive than from any other part of Nuristan ([14]).

The main fascination of Kafiristan originated in its "Dionysian" type of cultural pattern ([15]), combined with its central location in the Indo-Iranian context. By themselves the Kafir traits of polytheism, shamanism, magic, ancestor worship, aspects of head-hunting, feasts of merit, its rigidly stratified society with vertical mobility, etc. would have been an intriguing enough array. Its location in the Indo-Iranian world adds even more importance to this culture, in particular for students of comparative linguistics and religion. The Kafir main god Imrā/Māra corresponds to the Indo-Iranian god Yama/Yima, whose original function as god of the dead is still remembered in Nuristan in the form of local beliefs in the death spirit Yamrāi. The Indian god Indra was present complete with his garden, Nāndana, in Nuristān called Indrakūn (next to the village of Wama) ([16]). The Kafir god Mandi/Mōn/Mādē is probably derived from the Indian word Mahādeva, the "great god", a name of Śiva ([17]). More similarities to Indian, Iranian, Central Asian, and even pre-Buddhist Tibetan religious concepts (Bon religion) can be shown, pending further research ([18]).

On the basis of my own research I would like to draw attention to some hitherto unnoticed religious concepts which link Kafiristan with Tantric ideas. As is already long recognized, the sexual division of labour among the Kafirs reserved animal husbandry to men and agricultural activities to women, tabooing certain areas, houses, animals, objects etc. for members of the opposite sex. A highly developed concept of pure and impure related the free men to the pure world, upwards, the mountains and their products, and

([14]) The Parun valley is particularly rich in myths and hymns as shown by G. Buddruss' impressive collection, compiled during his stay in Parun in winter 1955/6. Unfortunately, only a

([16]) *Ibid.*, pp. 161-66, figs. 9-18.

([17]) See G. Morgenstierne, « Some Kati Myths and Hymns », *ActaO*, XXI, 1953, p. 164.

([18]) See K. [illegible] « Urgent Tasks of Re

the women to the impure, downwards, the valleys and their products. Beyond this crude dualism, however, and somehow in contrast with the discriminating attitude against women, there was a fundamental belief in female divinities and their needful energies as impelling forces for male deities ([19]).

The best indications of such beliefs were provided in the Parun valley, a strikingly beautiful dale counting six villages and a total of perhaps 1,500 people. In Kafir times this valley was the undisputed religious centre of all of Kafiristan, with the main Imrā/Māra temple located in the village of Kushteki ([20]). Still nowadays the valley seems uneasy in its adjustment to the new order, giving the impression of a still partly disoriented culture. Islam has not yet penetrated totally, and the old myths are still popular even with the younger people. However, one would hardly have imagined that any effigies of Kafir deities could have been spared by the iconoclastic Moslems. As a total suprise, six Kafir lineage temples, *amól,* still more or less complete with their original decoration (fig. 1), were discovered by the author in 1972 and 1974 in the two neighbouring villages of Dewa and Pronz. Before this, only Robertson had seen an *amól* decorated with effigies. He saw it in the village of Shtiwe, the highest one in Parun, and described it as « the house of the Shtevgrom priest » ([21]).

These *amól* are built larger than normal Parun houses. Half or even completely underground, they are dimly lit through one small smoke hole on top of a spacious chimney. Four main pillars around the fire place and perhaps some additional smaller pillars support the low wooden roof, which is thickly covered with soot textured like hanging spider webs. Behind the two main back pillars the space is filled with wooden compartments, boxes, and other storage containers. Here or there is a bedstead, and the household utensils lie around in a remarkable disorder. Altogether, the irregularity of the inside arrangements is stunning by comparison to the other parts of Nuristan. Of the four main pillars, the two rear ones at least are decorated with carved images resembling male or female figures. With their big flat faces reaching down to their breasts or knees, they usually sit on goats with either straight or interlacing, twisted horns. In Dewa's *Pödē-amól,* the *amól* of the Pödē lineage, the left rear pillar shows the god Māra mounted on a horse, holding a whip-like object in his right hand (fig. 2). Some of the effigies have suffered badly from wilful mutilations, others have survived surprisingly well (fig. 3) ([22]).

([19]) A first step towards a better assessment of the Kafir sexual dualism was undertaken by A.R. Palwal in his M.A. thesis *The Mother Goddess in Kafiristan. The Place of the Mother Goddess in the Religious Dualism of the Kafir Aryans, Afghanistan,* submitted to the Louisiana State University in 1972. I do not, however, support Palwal's identification of a mother goddess, since to place oneself under the protection "mother-like" deities.

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([20]) This temple was briefly seen by Robertson who, unfortunately, was refused permission to enter. See his book, *op. cit.,* pp. 389-92.

([21]) *Ibid.,* p. 491.

([22]) In all the other *amól* of Parun the old pillars with representations of deities had been replaced by new ones showing decorative patterns only. This was probably also the case in the

These *amól* served as lineage community centres and as places of worship of the particular tutelary lineage deity whose statue was normally kept inside a big box or wooden compartment in the sacred back part of the house. At cultic ritual occasions the statue was dressed and placed behind the fire-place, between the two main back pillars of which the left one also represented the god or goddess. In front of this pillar stood the chair of honour of the priest, *müint*, a man of high status who had merited the honour of living in the lineage-owned *amól* and of organizing religious rituals therein by generously feasting the members of his lineage.

As if the discovery of some original *amól* were not enough, in Dewa I even found the old assembly hall, *tīrē*, still partly standing, with one of the four main pillars shamelessly exposing to open view the picture of a female deity seated on a goat with her knees between the goat's horns (figs. 4, 5). By chance Robertson had seen this building during his short visit to Parun in 1891. He describes it as looking « like a huge bear-pit » which was « reached by long passages sloping down from the village level ». Talking about these assembly halls in general, calling them "gromma", he says that « they are nearly all of them half underground », and that they were used for guest-houses. « In one corner they generally have a small shrine, containing a quaintly carved idol of some god ». He then continues to describe the «marvellously grotesque figures» on the main pillars, and points out that « there is never any doubt, however, about the sex of an effigy of this kind » ([23]). Unfortunately he does not provide any more information.

These assembly halls, which should not be mistaken for the village community centres and dancing houses proper, called *tēlē* ([24]), had some vital functions related to initiation rites for boys and major decision-making procedures. Women were allegedly banned but goddesses were conspicuously present: in Dewa three of the four pillars ([25]) clearly show images of female deities repeatedly identified as Disnī, Sülmēch, and Kīme. The fourth pillar might have shown an image of the goddess Shingrē. Accordingly the only male deity inside Dewa's "men's house" presumably was Wushúm, the village god, whose statue and shrine are said to have stood in one corner of the building.

A similar importance was attached to the presence of female deities inside the *amól*, and, furthermore, goddesses were preferred to gods as tutelary lineage deities. The most important of these, Disnī, was particularly important. On the occasion of the feast Disnīklū, celebrated twice a year, Disnī's statue was carried out of the *amól* consecrated to her, the *Pödē-amól*, and was placed on a big stone outside the village wall of Dewa

voked Disnī to approach Māra, the Lord of the Gods, and to mediate in favour of his granting them food and offspring ([26]).

A similar ritual must have been performed in the village of Shtiwe where a special song in honour of Disnī describes her as « well-wisher of mankind » and « bearer of welfare from god ». In particular the song goes: « You are the one who receives permits from God » ([27]).

This idea of Disnī "bringing sensuality" is well presented in the Parun version of a myth describing the battle between the gods and the giants. In the decisive moment Disnī undressed herself and showed her well-rounded thighs to the faltering god Mandi. He thereupon got excited and lustily broke down the door into the giants' castle and killed the demons ([28]).

An analogous sensual theme dominated the yearly feast Disanedu in the village of Kamdesh (Bashgal valley), as described by Robertson ([29]). Significantly enough the invoking of Disnī was immediately followed by the praising of the war god Gish. In spite of Robertson's silence on this point there is reason to believe that the Disanedu had its climax in sexual orgies which again were the prelude to warrior raids, ritually conceived ([30]).

All of this reminds us of the Hindu Tantric concept of delegating the notion of static to the male and the notion of dynamic to the "cosmic woman as agent", as expressed in a famous Tantric text: « If Śiva is united with Śakti, he is able to exert his powers as lord; if not, the god is not able to stir » ([31]).

There is even more at hand to relate the Kafir symbolism to the Tantric polarity concepts. Particularly in the Waigal/Ashkun area countless wood-carvings on the doors, pillars, other important parts of the house, and on the ceremonial chairs of honour illustrate two dominant themes in the Kafir's beliefs: the belief in the magical power of horns, and the need to represent certain images in doubles. The concept of goat and similar horns as symbols of supernatural power, linking the bearer to the sacred world, is found all over Nuristan. A Kafir freeman "without horns" was considered weak and powerless. The possibility to achieve the right to horns was open only to the wealthy and reckless ones, favoured by fate, who economically and physically survived the required lavish feasts for the benefit of the community and the raids on enemies to prove one's virility. After fulfilling all the "prescribed" conditions, the candidate for the highest rank was ceremoniously initiated and henceforth was entitled to "show horns" all over his house as well as ritual objects and utensils. Goat horns were carved into the dominant

([26]) This information was given by Malek Dost Mahmad, the former headman of Dewa, on

([29]) Cf. JETTMAR, *Die Religionen...*, *cit.*, p. 147. Jettmar is referring to a particular day and

wooden parts of his house, in particular into the door (fig. 6) and the four pillars inside, and into various objects, including his ceremonial chair of honour called the "horn chair", *ṣiṇeṣ'ā* (Waigali idiom) ([32]). The great feastgiver's horns were of the intertwined type, referring to the domesticated goats which had been distributed and killed in considerable number for the many feasts. Such horns of domesticated goats indicated links of the beater to the supernatural world of male deities who themselves were imagined herding countless goats and being fond of feasting.

Another high rank was reserved for those who had earned the reputation of being particularly brave warriors, *bātūr* (Waigali) or *bahadūr* (Ashkun) ([33]), who had slain a certain number of enemies and had feasted the community accordingly. The *bātūr* was entitled to display himself as a great hunter by showing straight horns carved into the door of his house etc. (fig. 7). These horns represented the local mountain goat, the *markhor*, which was considered sacred to female hunting deities. By inference, a warrior felt assisted and protected in particular by female spirits.

To the *bātūr* belonged, furthermore, the horn-like objects known as *dandakū* or *danakōl* in the Waigal valley. These *dandakū* were considered so important that each of the four pillars, and certain doors, of the *bātūr*'s house were abundantly decorated with them; above the usual double image of human heads as a rule four *dandakū* were placed, or two *dandakū* above each head (fig. 8). Accordingly, one would expect that such objects would be put on the *bātūr*'s ceremonial head-dress. Indeed, one pillar discovered shows exactly that (fig. 9). Seemingly they were very special objects, consisting allegedly of a thin stick decorated with the colourful feathers of a monal pheasant, or with a small red pennon ([34]). There is no clear indication available as to whether they were worn in pairs as represented on the pillars. A question also arises as to why the depicted objects look like duplications in patterns of vertical symmetry.

To explain the *dandakū*, represented as "horns" on the posts of a *bātūr*'s ceremonial chair (figs. 10, 11), I venture to offer a perhaps daring interpretation: these objects might possibly symbolize in an abstract way the theme of sexual union as exhibited by the stunning images of intertwined couples which originated in the Waigal/Ashkun area (fig. 12) ([35]). The exact function of these effigies still being doubtful, it is nevertheless safe to suggest that they once decorated the usual platform railings ([36]) in front of the house of a particular meritorious, top-ranking man in order to demonstrate his power, wealth, and fertility — accomplished with the help of his wife. Similarly, a big ceremonial chair which was dis-

covered in 1949 in the village of Kegal (Waigal) ([37]) clearly displays the theme of sexual union, showing two copulating couples (fig. 13). By inference, can the *dandakū* be understood as a reduction of the sexual representations to less conspicuous images? Is the depicting of double heads on the pillars to be interpreted on similar lines, i.e. to be understood as male and female heads? In one exciting case, discovered in the Tetin valley (Ashkun), the two heads indeed are dissimilar, making it conceivable that the artist had actually thought of differentiating between male and female (fig. 14). Accordingly, the representation of three-and four-heads on pillars and three-four *dandakū* on each chair-post could indicate the duplication of the great achievements of a warrior and feast-giver ([38]).

There is good reason to suggest that the *dandakū* as well as the double head symbolized the very top rank of a man who had fulfilled all the "prescribed" requirements as a feast-giver and a *bātūr,* called *māladābātur* in the village of Nisheigrom (Waigal). His achievements, it could be followed, were the result of the union of the male and female principle as represented, in particular, by the intertwined figures similar to the *yab-yum* icon of the Tibetan Buddhists. By inference, was the Tantric belief in the dominant life-, wealth-, and energy-bestowing principle of sexual union also the main driving force in Kafiristan?

This surprising correspondence would be interesting enough if discovered in a wider Indian context. However, the proximity of the Swat valley, the Uḍḍiyāna of old Indian texts, which is increasingly credited with the main initial stimulus towards the development of Tantric beliefs ([39]), makes it particularly noteworthy. Kafiristan seems to confront us with the survival of concepts characteristic of Uḍḍiyāna. An illustrative case in point is the survival of the Uḍḍiyāna belief in the *ḍākinī* witches under their present name of *ḍēnik* (Bashgal valley) or *jēnī* (Parun valley): dreaded female spirits with very long breasts, keen on eating human flesh, fully versed in sorcery, and exerting mischievous influence on gods and kings. Similarly, the notion of Uḍḍiyāna as a miraculous country, full of magic and occult forces, seems to be still alive in the remarkable reputation of the Laghman area (SW of Kafiristan) as a centre of magic where Kafir shamans and magicians went for further training.

These are intriguing questions which however lead to caution, and must be dealt with in both greater detail and a wider context. With the importance of sexual symbolism once perceived, one exposes oneself to the danger of overemphasizing this point. The available data, as yet, cannot but excite interest and induce daring interpretations.

More field work is needed. Unfortunately, much damage was recently done to the remains of the Kafir culture by a sudden rush on objects from Nuristan, to be sold on the thriving antique market of Kabul. First, the loss of the ritual context, and now the disappearance of the last ritual objects and symbols impedes even further the study of Kafir culture and its exciting male-female polarity symbolism.